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# Gratitude in relationship marketing

## Theoretical development and directions for future research

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – For centuries, gratitude has represented an integral component of social relationships, yet it remains relatively overlooked by marketing scholars in the study of commercial relationships. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how gratitude helps to build, maintain and transform commercial relationships and to suggest noteworthy areas of investigation for those researchers seeking to help companies understand the role of gratitude in relationship marketing.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Gratitude's role in relational exchange is explored by a review of relevant literature and two qualitative studies. Questions developed from the literature and exploratory interviews are then investigated in a main study through in-depth interviews with buyers and sellers of goods and services in both B2B and B2C contexts, leading to a grounded theoretical foundation. Generalizations and directions for future research are presented.

**Findings** – Gratitude is a fundamental component of buyer-seller relationships and is critical for advancing relationship marketing theory and practice. Gratitude's changing role as relationship stages advance is described.

**Research limitations/implications** – The research is of an exploratory nature. Confirmation of the generalizations by other studies is suggested. This research is largely consistent with that from a markets-as-networks perspective and moves relationship marketing research toward a more extended view.

**Practical implications** – Gratitude should be included along with other relational mediators in discussions and investigations of relationship success, and practiced by those that seek to build, develop and enhance their buyer-seller relationships.

**Originality/value** – This paper provides a much needed exploration of a new and important topic in relationship marketing and a call for gratitude to be studied and implemented in a variety of relational exchange contexts. Specifically, it is the first to address the importance of gratitude to both buyers and sellers in B2B and B2C goods and services markets. It also is the first to document the changing role of gratitude through relationship stages.

**Keywords** Relationship marketing, Buyer behaviour, Buyer-seller relationships, Customer behaviour

**Paper type** Research paper



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## 1. Introduction

For the past several decades, marketing researchers have worked diligently to identify significant ingredients of buyer-seller relationships. Two of the most studied relational components are trust and commitment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Fullerton, 2005). However, in more recent research, Palmatier and his colleagues (Palmatier *et al.*, 2006; Palmatier *et al.*, 2007; Palmatier, 2008) posit gratitude as a key mediator in a model of relationship marketing (RM) alongside commitment and trust. In fact, Palmatier *et al.* (2009) demonstrate the importance of customer gratitude in explaining the effectiveness of sellers' RM activities. This is an impressive start, but only hints at the importance of gratitude in buyer-seller relationships by focusing specifically on buyer gratitude. Is it possible that both parties to an exchange can feel gratitude? Do both parties need to express gratitude? How does gratitude's role change over the course of a relationship? What association does gratitude have with other relational exchange constructs? What are the implications and how should researchers address such questions in future research?

We address these questions and others by examining the gratitude construct in the context of the relational exchange paradigm. Specifically, we use conceptualization and data to develop a grounded theoretical foundation of gratitude in commercial exchanges and its importance in RM. To develop our theoretical foundation, we first review existing literature and then conduct semi-structured exploratory interviews of buyers and sellers that demonstrate the expectation and importance of gratitude in commercial exchanges. To further develop our theoretical foundation and ground it in actual business practice, we conduct 22 in-depth semi-structured interviews in both the B2B and B2C context with buyers and sellers in goods and services industries, from which emerge generalizations and directions for future research.

This paper provides a much-needed exploration of a new and important topic in RM and a call for gratitude to be studied and implemented in a variety of relational exchange contexts. Our aim is to provide researchers and managers with a foundation for understanding gratitude's role in relational exchange and a discussion of its implications, along with a set of generalizations from which additional research and practice may develop. This is the first paper to provide a theoretical framework to understand gratitude in the context of RM and address the importance of gratitude to both buyers and sellers in B2B and B2C goods and services markets. It also is the first to document the changing role of gratitude through relationship stages.

The paper is organized in the following manner: We begin with a review of literature, providing an overview of the concept of gratitude and its relevance in commercial exchanges and importance in the relational paradigm. Then we provide details about our exploratory and main studies. Findings from our studies, as well as support from the literature are incorporated into our theoretical foundation. Generally, we argue that gratitude is a critical component of relationship creation and development that can promote positive relational behaviors and produce desired outcomes in ways distinct from more commonly studied relational constructs. Specifically, gratitude has the potential to transform transactional exchanges into relational ones, which differ from discrete economic transactions in their length, breadth, depth and intensity (Bolton *et al.*, 2004). We outline RM implications of gratitude, including research perspectives from which gratitude may be studied and the relationships among gratitude and other relational constructs. Additionally, we discuss the potential harmful consequences of disregarding the concept altogether. We conclude with implications. Our goal is that

after reading this article, researchers and managers will no longer be able to consider RM devoid of the concept of gratitude, and, more importantly, will have sufficient background on the concept to pursue further research.

## 2. Literature review

Based on past research, we examine gratitude at three levels: gratitude *per se*, gratitude in commercial exchanges, and gratitude in the relational exchange paradigm. By doing so, we introduce the concept and its role in relationship marketing.

### 2.1 Gratitude

Gratitude is the emotion that arises when an individual (beneficiary) perceives that an exchange partner (benefactor) (e.g. person or organization) has intentionally acted to improve the beneficiary's well being (see Fredrickson, 2004, p. 150). The "feeling of gratitude" refers to the emotional reaction to this perception.

Gratitude is composed of cognitive, affective and behavioral components, as when the beneficiary recognizes a benefit bestowed by a benefactor (cognition), appreciates the benefit (emotion), and acknowledges the benefit (behavior) (Buck, 2004; Steindl-Rast, 2004). Although it is possible to convey gratitude when it is not felt (Buck, 2004), we focus exclusively on actual feelings of gratitude as characterized by the "gratitude of caring" (Buck, 2004) and its sincere expression. Recognition and appreciation are required for gratitude to exist; without recognition, a beneficiary may not perceive himself as one, and without appreciation, feelings of gratitude will not exist. Therefore, recognition (cognitive component) is necessary, but not sufficient. As a result, we subsequently discuss only the emotional and behavioral components.

*2.1.1 The impact of gratitude.* "Adam Smith, the legendary economist and philosopher, proposed [in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*] that gratitude is a vital civic virtue, absolutely essential for the healthy functioning of societies" (Emmons, 2004, p. 3). Emmons and Tsang (2004) echo this sentiment based on the observation that gratitude motivates people to behave prosocially. Bartlett and DeSteno (2006) delve deeper into types of prosocial behavior and find that gratitude drives helping behavior. Specifically, gratefulness for another's actions, not awareness of society's reciprocity norm or a positive mood, causes participants to engage in helpful behaviors toward both the benefactor and also strangers. Grateful participants reciprocate a favor, even when doing so is costly to them. These authors also argue that over time, feelings of gratitude and their expression build trust and help develop long-term relationships. Even when gratitude is only felt (not expressed), these feelings of gratitude can increase the likelihood of future interactions (Bartlett and DeSteno, 2006).

*2.1.2 What gratitude is not. Reciprocity.* Reciprocity can have both positive and negative aspects, which include repaying gifts and taking revenge (Fehr and Gächter, 2000) and is more closely aligned with a score-keeping mentality (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). However, true expressions of gratitude are not characterized by "mindless tit-for-tat behavior" (Fredrickson, 2004, p. 150) or an expectation to receive in return, as may be the case with reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). Although social norms of reciprocity related to the appreciation and acknowledgement of benefits do exist and influence buyer-seller relationships (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Fehr and Gächter, 2000), gratitude functions more as an underlying motivator of such behaviors, as Becker (1986) calls gratitude the emotional core of reciprocity.



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*Indebtedness.* As a psychological construct, indebtedness involves “a state of obligation to repay another” for a received benefit (Greenberg, 1980, p. 4). Whereas gratitude is a positive emotion, indebtedness may include mixed affective associations, such as arousal and discomfort (Greenberg, 1980). Watkins *et al.* (2006) suggest that gratitude is internally generated, whereas indebtedness is an external obligation. True gratitude derives from the perceived intentions of the benefactor (internal assessment), whereas indebtedness is an attempt to uphold societal norms. In summary, the more a beneficiary perceives a benefit (or intended benefit) as a gift, the more likely he is to experience actual gratitude (McCullough and Tsang, 2004; Steindl-Rast, 2004).

### 2.2 Gratitude in commercial exchanges

After a brief overview of gratitude, we now turn to gather evidence of demonstration of gratitude in commercial exchanges. Gratitude may be “felt” in commercial exchanges when relational investments are made, which, for example, can include extra effort extended to benefit a buyer (e.g. support beyond contractually-obligated behaviors), purchases made based on factors beyond merely financial ones (e.g. desire to continue to work with a specific person or firm), or gifts exchanged (e.g. dinner, rounds of golf). As an interpersonal construct, “felt” gratitude, or the emotional component, operates at the individual level, but may be acknowledged or expressed corporately, such as when a company expresses gratitude to customers (B2C) or partners (B2B). Accordingly, we find that gratitude expressed toward customers is common in marketing practice. For example, the main electricity company in Belgium displayed a newspaper advertisement saying “Merci,” for the 200,000 plus clients who are now purchasing green energy (Papageorgiou, 2009) and gaming giant Konami has effusively thanked its fan base for the strength of its success (Gaming Rover, 2009). Expressions of gratitude also occur in B2B settings where ongoing relationships are vital: The International Olympic Committee thanked its worldwide partners in a *Fortune* magazine ad (Fortune, 2008), while Virtualware, winner of the prestigious European seal of e-Excellence Platinum award, expressed gratitude to the award organizers for providing the firm an opportunity to highlight its achievements (European Multimedia Forum, 2009).

Gratitude is not a simple matter of saying thank you to customers; companies attempt to express gratitude in different ways. According to Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos.com, “every year, we like to show a little gratitude. We take over a venue such as the Hard Rock Hotel pool or Rain Nightclub at the Palms and invite all of our vendors (more than 1,000) to our annual Vendor Appreciation Party” (Hsieh, 2010). Zappos also “surprises you [customers] with the carrot of free shipping upgrades regardless of what, or how much what [sic], you’ve purchased” (Murphy, 2009). Zappos’s actions can be seen both as expressions of gratitude toward customers and vendors and actions that are likely to induce gratitude within them, influencing future behaviors in favor of the benefactor (see Schimmel, 2004).

### 2.3 Gratitude and the relational exchange paradigm

Researchers have come to understand marketing as a dynamic process centered on continuing social and economic exchanges embedded in relationships (e.g. Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). This perspective, known as the relational exchange paradigm, is widely studied by academics (Anderson and Narus, 1990;



Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Hakansson and Ostberg, 1979; Morgan and Hunt, 1994) and implemented by practitioners (Heide and Wathne, 2006). On the contrary, a transactional exchange occurs between two parties when there is no intention of a future exchange (Terawatanavong *et al.*, 2007). The benefits of implementing relational programs are well documented for both buyers (e.g. Gwinner *et al.*, 1998) and sellers (e.g. Palmatier *et al.*, 2007) in business and consumer markets.

Gratitude may bridge the gap between the transactional and emerging relational exchange paradigms, as the recognition (cognitive component), experience (affective component) and expression (behavioral component) of gratitude can enhance relationship development. Recognizing (or perceiving) an intended benefit and experiencing gratitude motivates a desire for continued interactions (Bartlett and DeSteno, 2006), and expressions of gratitude create interrelated interactions, thus satisfying two key criteria distinguishing transactional from relational exchanges (e.g. De Wulf *et al.*, 2001; Walz *et al.*, 2009). Parties should want to engage in future transactions when they feel gratitude toward the exchange partner (Bartlett and DeSteno, 2006), and expressions of gratitude tend to bond people together (Fredrickson, 2004).

Further, expressions of gratitude can actually initiate a relationship. Raggio and Folsø (2007, 2011) find that expressions of gratitude promote prosocial behavioral intentions even among those who did not participate in the campaign for which they were being thanked.

*2.3.1 The impact of feelings of gratitude on relational exchange.* Prior research suggests that experiencing the positive emotion of gratitude will make future transactions more likely whether gratitude expression occurs or not (e.g. Buck, 2004; Fredrickson, 2004; Morales, 2005; Soscia, 2007). Feeling gratitude is an individual's recognition that the benefactor has acted towards the advantage of the beneficiary and acknowledgement of mutual civility leading to the building of trust (Buck, 2004). In a marketing context, two studies empirically address the ability of consumer-felt gratitude to positively influence consumer behavior. Morales (2005) finds that even when firm effort has no impact on product quality, it influences felt gratitude toward the high-effort firm, which produces pro-firm consumer behavior, such as increased willingness to pay, store choice, and overall evaluations. Soscia (2007) finds that gratitude, but not happiness, predicts repurchase intention and positive word of mouth. These studies indicate that feeling gratitude has the potential to encourage future economic exchanges and produce positive relational outcomes.

*2.3.2 The impact of gratitude expression on relational exchange.* Gratitude differs from traditional relational constructs such as commitment or trust in that it may lead to an intermediate step of behavior or expression (e.g. delivering or acknowledging a "thank you", endorsement, etc.), which is a visible phenomenon with its own set of rules, expectations, and benefits. Imagine a scenario where a homeowner receives something "extra" from an at-home service technician that is beyond the normal operating procedure of the company. Her felt gratitude makes it more likely that she will use the service again, and she might announce her gratitude in a public forum (e.g. Facebook). This endorsement may bring the company new customers, and may also increase her own commitment toward the firm (see, Ahluwalia *et al.*, 2000; Raju *et al.*, 2009). If the service provider is aware of her expression of gratitude, it may increase the firm's commitment to provide superior service in the future.



*2.3.3 Temporal relationship between gratitude and other relational mediators.* An interesting question that comes to mind relates to the relationship of gratitude with other constructs relevant to the relational paradigm. Satisfaction-trust-commitment is the general consensus on the causal order of mediating variables for relationship development (e.g. Ulaga and Eggert, 2006), though there are some exceptions (e.g. a certain level of trust must exist between two parties for them to engage in a market exchange in the first place [Guenzi and Pelloni, 2004]). Although no research considers how gratitude fits into this causal order, it is likely that gratitude plays an early role in relationship development due to the broaden-and-build ability (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001) of gratitude.

Trust is, in part, the forward focused belief (confidence), based on past interactions (Sichtmann, 2007), that another party will not be opportunistic but act benevolently in the future (Anderson and Weitz, 1992); whereas, gratitude is the emotion that results from the acknowledgment that a party has in fact (or is perceived to have) acted benevolently in the past (Doney and Cannon, 1997). Trust is also defined as one party's confidence in an exchange partner's integrity and competence (e.g. Johnson and Grayson, 2005; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Therefore, gratitude likely precedes trust (and therefore, commitment) because a person recognizes and responds emotionally to a partner's past benevolence before he or she forms beliefs about whether the partner will act benevolently in the future. Research supports this notion. Komter (2004) argues that in social contexts gratitude precedes trust and without it, trust would not exist. Palmatier *et al.* (2009) find empirical support for this positioning in B2B markets, with gratitude leading to trust, and trust leading to commitment (with no significant direct path from gratitude to commitment). Unfortunately, no prior work relates gratitude to satisfaction, which offers an opportunity for the present study and future work.

*2.3.4 The benefactor, beneficiary, and benefit perspectives of gratitude.* An important element of gratitude is the emotional reaction it evokes, leading to the question of who feels gratitude. A buyer can feel gratitude for the way a seller does business, and a seller can feel gratitude for the buyer's business. Thus, it is important to recognize that either party can be perceived as a benefactor or feel gratitude (as beneficiary). Additionally, researchers also are interested in studying the benefit and how different benefits induce feelings of gratitude; therefore, we now briefly review gratitude in commercial exchanges from the perspectives of the beneficiary, benefactor and the benefit (see, McCullough and Tsang, 2004).

The beneficiary perspective offers opportunities to investigate the ways in which people experience and express gratitude. Bone *et al.*' (2008) "you're welcome effect," identifies the importance of companies explicitly acknowledging customers' expressions of gratitude, which recognizes that customers can perceive themselves as beneficiaries. One New York law firm (beneficiary) found that when partners said "thank you" to associates (benefactor) for their hard work, the firm enjoyed decreased attrition and increased the percentage of summer associates who accepted an offer to return full-time (Lattman, 2007), implying that employers can see themselves as beneficiaries, and including employer-employee exchanges in the relevant domain of commercial exchanges.

The benefactor perspective enables researchers to investigate how, why, and to who a benefit is directed and how a benefactor responds to expressions of gratitude. Morales (2005) finds that customers can feel gratitude toward sellers that exert extra

effort, even when the seller's effort has no impact on product quality. In turn, felt gratitude produces pro-firm consumer behavior, such as increased willingness to pay, store choice, and overall evaluations. Likewise, Soscia (2007) finds that gratitude, but not happiness, predicts repurchase intention and positive word of mouth. Thus, it is clear that sellers have an economic incentive to generate feelings of gratitude in their buyers. However, not all seller actions are purely altruistic. For example, more and more hotels do not wash sheets or towels every night unless requested to do so. In addition to the potential environmental benefits, these actions reduce the costs of business by reducing the level of services provided. Do consumers feel gratitude in cases when companies also benefit? If so, do benefactors benefit when non-benevolent motives are disclosed? Morales (2005, p. 809) finds that when persuasion motives are made salient ("the store paid close attention to product displays, knowing them to be a guaranteed way to increase sales"), consumers are no more likely to visit a high-effort versus a low-effort store. It will be interesting to learn whether buyers can still feel gratitude even in situations where sellers benefit.

Finally, the *benefit perspective* addresses the question "for what are people grateful?" Palmatier *et al.* (2009, p. 3, emphasis added) define "feelings of gratitude" as "feelings of gratefulness, thankfulness or appreciation *for a benefit received.*" But people may be grateful merely for the intent or perceived intent to benefit. Roberts (2004) suggests that intentionality is subjectively determined and that neither good intentions on the part of the benefactor nor an actual benefit are required for a person to feel gratitude. Thus, a beneficiary's perception of good intentions may be sufficient to feel gratitude.

*2.3.5 The consequences of ingratitude in the relational paradigm.* While it is important to study the impact of gratitude, it is also essential to understand what happens when gratitude is not expressed in relational exchanges. Both expectancy-disconfirmation theory (Oliver, 1980) and equity theory (Adams, 1965) allude to dissatisfaction felt when a party expects gratitude expression or an acknowledgment of gratitude expression from the other party and does not receive it. Individuals consider the experience of gratitude an obligation whenever they receive unexpected (McCullough and Tsang, 2004) or undeserved (Steindl-Rast, 2004) benefits. Therefore, ingratitude (i.e. lack of appreciativeness) goes against what is expected, and thinkers over time have recognized the downside of appearing ungrateful. Cicero notes that "Men detest one forgetful of a benefit" (qtd. in Shelton, 2004, p. 265). "Hume called ingratitude, 'The most horrid and unnatural of all crimes that humans are capable of committing.'" (qtd. in Emmons, 2004, p. 7). These writings clearly demonstrate that gratitude expressions (or avoidance of the perception of ingratitude) constitute a norm, or expected behavior, in social relationships. Norms have been shown to be important in the development of buyer-seller relationships (e.g. Heide and John, 1992). Even a single violation of a norm could inhibit trust and commitment, undermining a partner's long-term orientation (Ryu *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, the impact of perceived ingratitude may do more to harm a relationship than a proper gratitude expression could do to enhance it. Consistent with this view, Palmatier *et al.* (2007, p. 189) indicate that norms are a "necessary but insufficient condition for high-performance exchanges" and that "violating norms ensures underperformance, but following norms does not guarantee high performance."

*2.3.6 The gratitude cycle.* Based on the prior literature, we now summarize the role of gratitude in the context of the relational exchange paradigm. When gratitude is

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expressed (not just felt), a secondary or non-market-based (non-financial) exchange takes place, which can increase the likelihood of future market-based exchanges. As part of, or apart from, the original transactional exchange, one party (benefactor) may appear to have intended to benefit the other party (beneficiary) in a way that goes beyond mere obligation. This perceived benefit initiates what we call a gratitude cycle (i.e. benefit-gratitude-expression-acknowledgement). A gratitude cycle begins sometime after the initial transactional exchange (i.e. after a benefit has been received) and ends with the expression or acknowledgment of gratitude.

Exchange partners must come to a mutual understanding that completion of the gratitude cycle has been accomplished for gratitude to have its full transformational power on both parties. For instance, in the previous Zappos example the party may be intended as a generous expression of gratitude, but such events may not complete the gratitude cycle because they are not directed at a particular exchange partner. Such events may be grand and costly, but additional directed expressions may still be necessary.

To sum up, the literature review explored gratitude at three levels and helped us develop the concept of the gratitude cycle as an initial component of our theoretical foundation. Yet important questions remain unanswered with respect to gratitude and its role in the relational exchange paradigm. Such questions relate to the importance of gratitude in business relationships, reasons for feeling gratitude, the importance of felt vs expressed gratitude and the importance of personal intent of the involved parties. In addition, more profound questions related to how gratitude helps deepen relationships, the effects of incomplete gratitude cycles, and ingratitude warrant attention. Finally, little is known about the role of gratitude with respect to other relational constructs such as satisfaction, trust and commitment, although we suspect that gratitude likely plays an early role, potentially preceding all three. We now provide some answers based on qualitative data, and propose additional questions for future research.

### 3. Methodology

As our objective is to use conceptualization and data to develop new theory, we collected data via a qualitative method of inquiry, through two phases of interviews: The first phase helped us gauge the overall importance of gratitude in business relationships. The second phase delved deeper into the construct and helped us further develop our grounded theoretical foundation (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Goulding, 1999, 2005).

#### 3.1 Initial exploratory study

The goal of the first phase was to explore the importance of gratitude in commercial exchanges. Since this was our first step to probe the relevance of gratitude, data were collected by students who were trained in relational exchange theory and practice in an upper-division undergraduate marketing course. After a training session on proper interview techniques, teams of two interviewers conducted interviews with at least two consumers, one front-line employee, and one manager from regional or national companies. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed by the researchers (Spiggle, 1994). A total of 103 interviews were completed.





The semi-structured interviews began by asking respondents to describe an exchange relationship in which they currently were engaged. Consistent with prior exploratory research involving relational concept formulation (e.g. de Chernatony and Riley, 1998), interviewers were given a list of probing questions to elicit detail from the respondent. Respondents were then asked two questions related to gratitude in the focal relationship: Whether expressions of gratitude are a necessary element for the described relationship; Whether expressions of gratitude are a necessary responsibility for the seller, buyer, or both parties.

As a requirement of the assignment, all manager respondents interacted with customers on the job, and all front-line employees were employed by the company for at least six months, allowing for ample experience to describe a current customer relationship. Recognizing that the focal activity (exchange) is very broad, that we wish to address it across B2B and B2C, goods and services contexts, and that the focus of gratitude may be on an individual or a company, we did not want to limit what we might find by creating restrictive groups *a priori*. Based on the literature review and responses to the initial exploratory study, we developed questions that would be important to investigate further. We explore these questions in the main study.

### 3.2 Main study

In order to further develop our theoretical foundation and ground it in business practice, our main study uses semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 22 buyers and sellers of goods and services in both B2B and B2C contexts. Purposive sampling was used, enabling for a rich variation of relationship types and informant perspectives. Respondents were selected from five different US cities (Baton Rouge, LA; Richmond, VA; Houston, TX; Grand Rapids, MI; Fairfield, CT). Our expectation was that by following accepted qualitative research method procedures (e.g. Spiggle, 1994; Goulding, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2005), we would be able to organize the insights gained from the literature and the initial exploratory study into a semi-structured questionnaire, and then uncover the emergence of new themes, and develop generalizations from these data for future exploration.

Semi-structured interviews offer the best means of identifying concepts, factors and processes related to gratitude, as they provide some structure to the interview process while encouraging interviewees to freely discuss the phenomenon of interest in their own words and allowing the interviewer to probe thoughts as needed (Bernard, 1988). To this end, we developed an interview guide (available from authors) from the literature review and the initial exploratory study conducted in the first phase. Questions related to the concept of gratitude and its role in business relationships. "Relationship" was defined as the informant having completed at least one purchase with the other party and the intention to complete another exchange with this party in the future. Respondents were asked to share experiences of feelings and expressions of gratitude in a business relationship with a customer or vendor, their understanding of gratitude and such feelings and/or expressions, how gratitude impacts a relationship, the relation between gratitude and other meditational constructs such as trust and satisfaction and their perception of how the role of gratitude changes over the course of a relationship. Other questions related to the role of intention in gratitude and understanding gratitude from the benefactor, beneficiary and benefit perspectives. All interviews lasted approximately one hour; all interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis by the research team.



Data analysis included activities related to categorization, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalization, integration, and iteration (Spiggle, 1994). To begin, each researcher conducted one interview, recording and transcribing it for the others to review, and then all four researchers met to discuss the key emergent themes and refine the interview guide to better capture respondent experiences. We repeated the recalibration halfway through the interviews, which resulted in an “iterative or spiral process” of data collection (Lee and Cadogan, 2009, p. 359). Thus, later interviews were informed from the discussion based on our earlier interviews. A constant comparison method was used (Corbin and Strauss, 1990), abstracting, categorizing, comparing and integrating responses from one interview with themes that emerged from the others. This allowed the researchers to ask more direct clarifying questions based on prior responses and analysis. As new themes emerged, efforts were made to establish relationships with existing themes to develop a broader theoretical framework. We shared our findings and noted convergence or divergence from our developing theoretical foundation throughout the process, analyzing and discussing data as collected for better interpretation. During the process of data analysis and development of generalizations, efforts were made to consult extant literature to develop a well-rounded view of gratitude. After all interviews were complete, generalizations were developed where there was a clear consensus among all respondents (i.e. no more than two disagreeing). Next, we present our theoretical foundation, which primarily is based on the themes and discussions that emerged from this phase, along with verbatim quotations from both phases.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Exploratory study results

Gratitude is an instrumental component of exchange relationships and is an expectation of both buyers and sellers (see Table I). Across all relationship contexts (retail, services, branding and B2B), exploratory findings support the contention that gratitude is necessary for relationship formation: 78 percent of respondents indicate that gratitude expression is necessary for at least one party in relationship formation. Half of the respondents indicate that gratitude expressions are the responsibility of both buyer and seller. While some differences in this finding exist across relational contexts, 70 percent of B2B respondents indicate that gratitude is a reciprocal

Relationship contexts	Who is responsible for gratitude expression?			
	At least one party	Both parties	Seller	Buyer
Managers describing a B2B relationship ( $n = 10$ )	70	70	70	70
Customers describing relationship with a services firm ( $n = 12$ )	83	67	83	67
Customers describing relationship with a consumer branded product ( $n = 7$ )	86	43	86	43
Retailing ( $n = 74$ )	77	46	70	53
Manager describing relationship with retail customer ( $n = 16$ )	88	44	81	50
Sales-associate describing relationship with retail customer ( $n = 21$ )	81	43	76	48
Customer describing relationship with a retailer ( $n = 37$ )	70	49	62	57
All contexts ( $n = 103$ )	78	50	73	55

**Table I.**  
Percentage of respondents identifying gratitude as necessary in relationship formation

responsibility of both partners. Initial findings reflect the importance of gratitude in a variety of relational exchange contexts for both buyers and sellers, thus encouraging us to conduct in-depth interviews in the second phase to delve deeper into the role gratitude plays in commercial exchanges.

4.2 Main study results

Table II provides information about our main study respondents. Verbatim quotes are provided subsequently when respondents' comments clearly capture the essence of the finding being discussed. Numbers in brackets following verbatim quotes represent main study respondent number as presented in Table II.

4.2.1 *The importance of gratitude feelings and expressions in commercial relationships.* Overall, both studies demonstrate the necessity of gratitude in relationship formation. For example, one B2B respondent said, "gratitude helps in building better relationships quicker." [R10] Other comments include:

Gratitude is important in the early stages. You don't know much about the person's experience, but the gratitude can tell you about his character. It makes me want to move further into the project – even if I don't know he is any good at what he does. It makes me more patient I think [R17].

All respondents believe that it is absolutely essential to feel gratitude in commercial relationships, especially when the motivation is to develop relationships over a long period of time. Although even ordinary and commonplace efforts such as consistency, honesty, dependability, reliability, willingness to share/communicate, and empathy can generate feelings of gratitude, uncommon actions such as "giving us a second

Respondent	Age	Sex	B2B/consumer	Goods/services	Buyer/seller
1	56	Female	B2B	Goods	Buyer
2	47	Male	B2B	Goods	Buyer
3	41	Male	B2B	Goods	Seller
4	55	Male	B2B	Goods	Seller
5	38	Female	B2B	Service	Buyer
6	38	Female	B2B	Service	Buyer
7	48	Male	B2B	Service	Seller
8	31	Male	B2B	Service	Seller
9	34	Female	B2B	Service	Buyer
10	52	Female	B2B	Service	Seller
11	34	Male	B2B	Service	Seller
12	30	Male	Consumer	Goods	Seller
13	42	Male	Consumer	Goods	Buyer
14	32	Male	Consumer	Goods	Seller
15	35	Female	Consumer	Service	Buyer
16	61	Female	Consumer	Service	Buyer
17	65	Male	Consumer	Service	Buyer
18	26	Female	Consumer	Service	Buyer
19	32	Female	Consumer	Service	Buyer
20	29	Female	Consumer	Service	Buyer
21	32	Female	Consumer	Service	Seller
22	37	Female	Consumer	Service	Seller

**Table II.**  
Main study respondents



chance” [R11], sticking to terms as originally agreed even after company policy changed [R5], and “they moved a whole third shift to accommodate our job” [R7], invariably generate feelings of gratitude. In turn, feelings of gratitude bond people to the individuals and companies they perceive as benefactors and make people desire future transactions, thus alluding to the temporal relationship between gratitude and commitment. For example, reflecting on the superior efforts of one package-delivery company, a respondent noted: “We don’t even think of moving to [competitor]” [R14].

Gratitude expression can be important in commercial relationships, but even feelings alone can have a positive impact: “Having just a feeling [of gratitude] is still OK because feelings usually come through in your actions” [R11]. In the main study, only one respondent disagrees with the notion that buyers are responsible for expressions of gratitude: “Customers are not expected to say thank you because they paid for it. Their thank you is the payment” [R11]. All other respondents believe it is the responsibility of both parties, but emphasize that it is critical for the seller.

Respondents overwhelmingly agree that gratitude expressions can deepen relationships. “Expression confirms the feeling. It is a continuation of the relationship” [R12]. In B2B settings, buyer gratitude can advance the relationship to higher stages. For example: “A good business move for the buyer to do it [express gratitude]. Not necessarily required, but smart if you value the company you’re working with” [9]. However, buyers regularly state that their gratitude expressions are more likely to be in the form of referrals, additional business, paying on time, sharing information or other cooperative behaviors, rather than an explicit “thank you”:

Generally they [customers] don’t reciprocate. If they do, it is with giving us more business. In sales, the kind of gratitude that matters is *commissions* [R3, emphasis added].

As a consumer. . . in my opinion when a company has met or exceeded expectations then it is your duty, it is the right thing to do, to give positive *word of mouth* [R8, emphasis added].

**4.2.2 The gratitude cycle.** Respondents confirm the transformational nature of the gratitude cycle. Exchange partners, especially buyers, want to work with others who appreciate their business and efforts. For example:

I know it [an expression of gratitude] made a significant impression at the beginning. It made me for sure want to come back again [R20].

All things equal, I would rather deal with a vendor that expresses gratitude. It builds relationships [. . .]. You know they will deliver on what you need. If a vendor is grateful, they are more likely to do a better job for you [R9].

Sellers stated:

We worked harder as a result [of the expression of gratitude from a customer] [. . .]. Every confirmation takes you to the next level. You do better, bonds become stronger [R11].

When people show appreciation and gratitude it automatically makes you want to raise your level of performance for that individual or that company because you know that they care about what you do and because of that you want to find ways to raise the bar and help them [R7].

As we discuss subsequently, the role of gratitude evolves as relationships mature, but there is clear consensus across the literature and both studies that gratitude is a transformational mechanism in relationship development. For example, when a

company moved an entire third shift to accommodate a customer's order, the customer not only felt gratitude for the action, but also believed that it was because the company was grateful for his prior business and wanted to keep it in the future:

It wouldn't make sense for that one job, but it made sense if you had a long-term customer relationship mentality [. . .]. He did that because there was a sense of gratitude or a sense of relationship [R7].

We see complete gratitude cycles in these examples as companies appreciated their customers' prior business and in response increased their commitment to the customers with extraordinary service, which led to greater commitment, positive word of mouth, and, most importantly, future orders. This positive reciprocal behavior, driven by gratitude, is what builds strong relationships. Seller respondents suggest that gratitude expressions from customers are less common but are appreciated and function as feedback a seller may not normally receive. Furthermore, several respondents suggested that gratitude expressions from sellers are more effective when small, directed gifts are given as opposed to large events encompassing all customers.

In addition, we find overwhelming support for the importance of gratitude cycle completion. As one B2B respondent relates:

I had a customer that was in a real jam. We dropped everything and we took care of them. They treated the situation like they deserved it. They didn't seem to see that we went above and beyond, that we bailed them out of a tight spot. It was "you should just do that." You don't just do that. You couldn't do that every day and stay in business [. . .]. When he calls I really don't care if I talk to him [. . .]. Absolutely it harms the relationship [R4].

A B2C customer says:

The contrite thank you for business is expected, but doesn't garner any emotional response. But its absence would lead to negative feelings [R15].

In addition, buyers focus not just on the presence of gratitude expression, but also on the sincerity of the expression:

I think he said thanks, but I knew from his facial expression and lack of time for me that he didn't appreciate it [R17].

When I said thanks, she said you're welcome. But, I knew she wasn't even meaning it [R21].

Thus, it is possible to complete all the steps of the gratitude cycle, but one or more participants might believe it is left incomplete if actions are not perceived as sincere.

*4.2.3 Gratitude's changing role over relationship stages.* Our main study reveals a new theme critical to understanding gratitude's role in relational exchanges, viz., that gratitude's role evolves over relationship stages. Dwyer *et al.* (1987) describe three active relationship stages: exploration, expansion and commitment. We find that in the exploration stage, gratitude is focused on specific behaviors, e.g. thanks for the meeting, thanks for delivering on time, thanks for coming in (e.g. to a seller's shop), thanks for doing a good job, thanks for meeting the budget and schedule, etc. As one respondent notes:

It starts with delivering on time and invoicing us properly [. . .] we're very grateful for the base relationship component – reliability and accuracy – and if they can do some of these other things, it just compounds that gratitude and that loyalty [R2].



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However, as the relationship grows, respondents become grateful for the relationship. One respondent succinctly summed up the entire evolution:

When expanding [exploration], we are more grateful with the situation and conscious of it. In continuing [committed], grateful that the relationship doesn't tax or take away scarce time to manage the relationship – it just happens. We may not express it as often now as we should because the gratitude is for the overall relationship, not specific or particular actions [...] It [gratitude] comes later on because early it's more about reliability and consistency, trust and respect [R9].

After completion of the interview, respondent [R9] (and [R8]) recognized that she had not recently expressed gratitude to some of her best suppliers ([R8]'s customers), but planned to do so subsequently. The paradox is that after trust develops in the expansion stage, relationships move to a higher level, but gratitude is often expressed less than in the early stages. One respondent suggested that gratitude played a role early, but "Later on, I bet I rely on friendship more than gratitude" [R22]. We note how she contrasted gratitude with friendship, even though gratitude is a fundamental component of interpersonal relationships. Overall, we find that early on, parties are grateful for successful transactions while later on there is a general sense of gratitude for the relationship.

*4.2.4 Temporal relationship between gratitude and other relational mediators.* We have seen clearly in the previous discussion of the gratitude cycle that gratitude precedes commitment. Respondents also consistently felt that gratitude leads to trust.

I think it [gratitude] really builds relationships and trust, at least it does with my customers [R21].

I think that first they perform, which we appreciate, and then over time, we trust them, and that plays out in the form of loyalty. Trust comes with a lot of accumulated gratitude [R2].

I think with gratitude, the trust and commitment toward excellence is much higher. You are more motivated and dedicated. You feel good – you feel like doing good work. Everything increases. If you have gratitude then they have done something good for you. So you want to give it back [R6].

Because we are small and new, we have the ability to blow away first-time customers. They appreciate this early on, but trust comes later [after gratitude]. After a while, they trust us to deliver every time [R12].

However, we find mixed results regarding its temporal relationship with satisfaction; nearly half believe gratitude precedes satisfaction, while the others believe satisfaction precedes gratitude. Following is an example of the latter.

You'll never build the expression of gratitude if you don't meet them [expectations]. It's easier to build the more you exceed them [expectations] [R4].

Regardless of the ordering, respondents clearly see gratitude and satisfaction as distinct constructs, even when asked if gratitude was an extreme form of satisfaction, in essence equating it with delight (only one respondent believes that gratitude and delight are equivalent concepts). Thus, a more complete sequence of relational mediators is gratitude/satisfaction (sequence TBD)-trust-commitment, demonstrating that the traditional focus only on commitment and trust may be lacking an important antecedent. This single finding is compelling evidence for the role of gratitude in RM.



*4.2.5 The role of intent to benefit.* Consumers overwhelmingly feel gratitude even when companies also benefit, characterizing such shared benefits as “win-win” [R4]:

It would be surprising if I felt that I am not grateful because the company is benefitting at the same time I am benefitting [R6].

If it benefits the company, I don't care, it can [R13].

Additionally, respondents agree that receiving an actual benefit may not be required to feel gratitude if they perceive effort on their behalf.

For example, my insurance rates just went up [. . .]. The 20 percent increase I just got, [my broker] can't control that, but he tried to run the numbers another way, tried several things [. . .]. But he couldn't get it to work out any way he ran it [. . .]. I was grateful and I expressed gratitude for trying. I don't have a bad feeling towards him. Now do I have that same feeling towards [insurance company]? Probably not [R8].

Even if an action is based on corporate policy and not a personal intent to benefit (e.g. Zappos's free shipping upgrades), respondents make a link between corporate policy and intent to benefit exchange partners:

Sure, grateful that someone thought of a policy that would benefit their customer or vendor [. . .]. If somebody put a policy in place that makes it easier for their employees to benefit somebody, that means somebody really thought about their business [R7].

They really make their customers a priority. That is their intent. That would motivate me to feel gratitude [R20].

Definitely I could be grateful for that because they had the foresight to create policies that are beneficial [R2].

Grateful for the types of policies that are pro-consumer, that is looking out for the consumer, rather than feeling like they are protecting the business [R8].

Thus, a personal intent to benefit an exchange partner may not be required, even if the company also benefits, as long as an actual benefit or intent to benefit is perceived. This finding represents a significant and positive departure from gratitude's functioning in interpersonal relationships. As a result, managers can focus on gratitude-inducing policies rather than attempting to deliver customer-specific actions. Likewise, researchers can focus on effects across the population of exchange partners as opposed to dyadic interactions.

*4.2.6 The consequences of ingratitude in the relational paradigm.* As discussed previously, main study B2B respondents indicate dissatisfaction with expected-but-unexpressed gratitude, but also demonstrate willingness to continue the relationship, as if such lack of expression is expected in business. B2C customers, on the contrary, are more likely to terminate a relationship if an expected expression of gratitude is not given. More importantly, respondent comments demonstrate a critical asymmetry: “The lack of gratitude would make me stay away more than the gratitude would make me go back” [R6]. Thus, it may be important to study gratitude in RM simply for the purpose of knowing how to avoid the perception of ingratitude, as its consequences may be irreversibly harmful.



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## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Summary of results

Our generalizations are presented in the following list. We offer these generalizations as a starting point for future researchers investigating the place of gratitude in relational exchange. In a nutshell, our data are largely consistent with extant literature on gratitude in social relationships. We can state that gratitude is a fundamental component of buyer-seller relationships, is implicit in relational exchange theory and manifest in practice, and has the potential to transform existing and motivate future relationships. Gratitude assists in maintaining a dynamic equilibrium between donor and receiver (Heilbrun, 1972), encourages beneficial reciprocal behavior (Algoe, 2006; Emmons and McCullough, 2004), and contributes to the development of long-term relationships (Bartlett and DeSteno, 2006). In essence, “gratitude represents a ‘starting mechanism’” which “initiates an ongoing cycle of reciprocation, which self-reinforces norms of reciprocity” (Palmatier, 2008, p. 29). Although both the experience and expression of gratitude lead to positive outcomes for relationship creation and development, they operate very differently, and all the benefits of gratitude may not be realized fully if the gratitude cycle is left incomplete. The role of gratitude changes over time. During exploration, gratitude is important, but is focused on specific or discrete actions. As relationships expand, gratitude leads to trust. In committed relationships, exchange partners develop an appreciation for the overall relationship.

#### *Generalizations*

- (1) Gratitude builds and strengthens relationships.
  - a. It is absolutely critical to feel in commercial relationships, while expression tends to deepen those relationships.
  - b. It plays a different role as relationships advance through stages.
    - i. At early stages, exchange partners feel gratitude for “performance,” demonstrating an early bias towards results over relationship.
    - ii. At later stages, exchange partners feel gratitude for the relationship.
- (2) Gratitude precedes trust and commitment.
- (3) Asymmetry in buyer/seller expectations of expressions of gratitude: respondents say that “both are responsible”, but demonstrate higher expectations on the part of sellers.
- (4) Receiving expected expressions of gratitude may not have a significantly positive impact, but withholding expected expressions of gratitude can have a significantly negative impact on relationship development.
- (5) Buyer expressions of gratitude are usually in the form of new business, references, or other non-direct actions.
- (6) Individuals can feel gratitude for an exchange partner’s effort, even when a desired result is not achieved.
- (7) Exchange partners can feel gratitude even when a partners’ actions benefit it as well (win-win).
- (8) Exchange partners can feel gratitude when actions that they appreciate are driven by company policy and not a personal intent to benefit.

- (9) Gratitude and satisfaction are distinct constructs and one may exist without the other.

### 5.2 Future research opportunities

Our research identified a number of factors for which buyers and sellers are grateful. One area that warrants further investigation relates to whether consumers can be grateful for a job done competently, or are they only grateful for a job that exceeds their expectations? Morales's (2005) results indicate the former; but it would be interesting to investigate whether the latter leads to an even higher probability of gratitude expression from the buyer. Although the majority of respondents agree that it is "smart" on the part of both parties to express gratitude, some discussed an asymmetry in the expectations with the onus mainly lying with sellers to express gratitude. This asymmetry in expectations between buyers and sellers has significant implications for a mutual understanding of completion of the gratitude cycle. For example, it is unknown how such asymmetry in felt and/or expressed gratitude would affect the completion of the gratitude cycle. Such asymmetry also leads us to question how it would affect the broaden-and-build concept of gratitude in developing long-term relationships. Future research should probe to understand the roles and behaviors of various participants in feeling and expressing gratitude and how these assist in completing the gratitude cycle.

While we have alluded to the importance of viewing gratitude from benefactor, beneficiary and benefit perspectives, there are a number of areas that need more attention. We have not delved deeply into the particular manifestations of benefits or of expressions of gratitude that are most effective at completing the gratitude cycle and contributing to relationship development. Further work considering types and timing of benefits and expressions is required.

Additional research must attempt to understand factors that may make benefactor motives salient and the effect this has on gratitude. Another area of further research relates to the pressure of reciprocating benefits. Such behaviors may have potential implications for ethical misuse. Indeed, Palmatier *et al.* (2009, p. 2) state, "The most effective RM programs probably tap into this [imperative] force, resulting in customer repayment...". Further, the finding that perceived effort may be sufficient to induce feelings of gratitude raises ethical questions as it may create an incentive for individuals to fabricate stories about effort expended on behalf of an exchange partner. Researchers will want to carefully evaluate the ethical implications of the gratitude cycle and the extent to which it produces unwanted pressure to reciprocate benefits. It is possible that while gratitude is important in commercial relationships, the expected response to intended benefits is critical in determining ethical implications. Much needs to be researched regarding the temporal role of gratitude with respect to other relational constructs. Little is known about its relationship with satisfaction. We note that the satisfaction literature includes several types of satisfaction depending on the situation the consumer is analyzing. It is possible that a more specific type of satisfaction (e.g. attribute satisfaction) leads to gratitude, while gratitude influences overall satisfaction (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999). Future research should explore the relationships among felt gratitude, expressed gratitude and specific types of satisfaction. Is felt gratitude a reflection or outcome of satisfaction? Does a customer have to be satisfied to feel gratitude? Does expressed gratitude by a customer signify



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satisfaction? Further, what is the relationship between gratitude and delight? These and other questions await future research.

As discussed previously, a major area of concern relates to the consequences of ingratitude and/or lack of expression of gratitude. It is clear that ingratitude and/or lack of expressions of gratitude may have a much higher negative impact than the positive effects of expressions of gratitude. Such lack of expressions may be detrimental to long term relationships. It may be important to quantify this asymmetry to help us understand the relative importance of the costs of perceived ingratitude and the value of proper gratitude expressions. On the flip side, researchers should consider the implications of effusive and/or insincere expressions of gratitude. Does it harm a relationship if relationship partners believe an expression is “over the top,” or artificial and lacking in sincerity? There likely exists a sweet spot between lack of expression and effusive expression. Future research should study this issue in greater detail.

On first inspection, the title indicates a paper focused squarely on the RM perspective; however, our views on the role of gratitude in exchange relationships are largely consistent with the markets-as-networks (NW) perspective. For example, we focus on the importance of considering the impact of the feeling and expression of gratitude from the perspective of both the seller and buyer (Mattsson, 1997), take as our unit of analysis business relationships in general rather than the financial outcomes of the relationship (Mattsson, 1997) or of “RM investments” as do Palmatier *et al.* (2009), attempt to identify “mechanisms by which the nature of the relationship are brought into being” (Sayer, 1992), view relationships as social structures (Ryan *et al.*, 2009), and offer the gratitude cycle, which recognizes that events such as gratitude expressions are not discrete events, but rather are “embedded in overlapping sets of processes over time” (Ryan *et al.*, 2009, p. 10). Further, although we do suggest a normative approach with implications for managers (which is contrary to NW), our studies reveal a condition of relationships “as they are” (Mattsson, 1997, p. 449) but which has not been adequately appreciated by researchers taking the RM perspective. This last point seems most important. It could be argued that this paper brings a NW perspective to RM; that is, it moves toward what Mattsson (1997, p. 458) calls the “extended view” of RM. Although we did not explore the linkages between these two perspectives in the present paper, we suggest that because of the overlap in approach, the study of gratitude may offer a natural bridge between the RM and NW perspectives that could be exploited by researchers seeking to close the philosophical gap.

### 5.3 Limitations

Our goal was to demonstrate the general applicability of the concept of gratitude in RM. However, many other interesting topics relating to gratitude in commercial relationships exist that we are not able to discuss due to space constraints. Although we note some differences, we did not delve deeply into differences between gratitude in B2B versus B2C and goods versus services contexts. Future researchers should seek to identify differences in the way gratitude works in these contexts. Likewise, the application of these ideas at different levels of the organization should be investigated. For example, the same action may generate feelings of gratitude if received from a front-line employee, but not from a manager.

Finally, our studies were limited in scope and should not be viewed as a test of hypotheses or specific propositions. Rather, the results of the studies provide a

grounded theoretical foundation. This research sets the stage for more in-depth empirical investigation with proper sampling and testing.

#### 5.4 Conclusions

Our research and analysis lead us to suggest that gratitude is a significant factor that must be considered from different perspectives in the study of commercial relationships. We argue that gratitude is a culturally-reinforced bilateral norm (Eyuboglu and Buja, 1993) that can help parties to broaden, build and strengthen positive and lasting relationships. The experience, expression, and acknowledgment of gratitude are not only long-standing social norms, but also transforming mechanisms. Components of the gratitude cycle are often expected in both social and business relationships, and their occurrence is instrumental in transforming an interaction between two parties into a relationship. Without completion of the gratitude cycle, parties in relational exchanges are likely to be dissatisfied.

We are not suggesting that expressions of gratitude and completing a gratitude cycle are the only ways to establish and flourish long-term relationships; however, gratitude precedes and contributes to trust and commitment, and has positive benefits that are important to all relational exchange parties. We extend earlier research by demonstrating that gratitude should not only be studied from the buyer's perspective; expressions of gratitude by both parties enhance relationships. We also identify the changing role of gratitude throughout relationship stages. Thus, we reiterate Palmatier *et al.*'s (2009) recommendation that gratitude should be considered along with other relational mediators in investigations of relationship success and practiced by managers that seek to build, develop and enhance their buyer-seller relationships. One respondent sums up our thoughts very well: "Gratitude is essential in your whole business. I express it continually to my employees, our customers and we do to our vendors; we've even tried it to our franchisor. You can build a business without it [gratitude], but it won't be as strong" [R2].

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